

IMAGINED COMMODITIES: THE BUYING, SELLING, AND PRODUCING OF
LANGUAGE AND WORDS IN INDONESIAN AGRICULTURAL PROJECTS

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ABSTRACT

The proliferation of green capitalist opportunities for rural farmers has expanded market integration to the furthest corners of the globe. Fair Trade, organics, System of Rice Intensification (SRI) and other alternative development programs within agriculture have significantly changed the way that consumers, organizations, and producers interact. While these changing interactions between these groups have been studied, surprisingly little research has been done on the changing forms of the commodities being exchanged. This paper explores the complex nature of the commodities within green capitalism through an ethnographic study of an SRI project in West Java, Indonesia. I contend that the new world of commodities in green capitalism of agriculture has become delinked from the tangible, and that a new commodity being exchanged in this project is the idea of and the word organic. These “imagined commodities” are an important step in rethinking the importance of cultural and social values within economics.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Born on November 14, 1981 in rural Missouri, Rebakah Daro Minarchek has been surrounded by agriculture from an early age. She attended and graduated from St. Mary's High School in Independence, Missouri in 2000. She graduated in 2004 Magna Cum Laude from Missouri State University from the Honors College, earning a Bachelor of Science with a double major in Mass Media and Communications, and a minor in English. Upon graduation, she traveled to Thailand for a position teaching English after earning a Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) Certificate. In 2007, she returned to the United States to continue her education. In 2010, she earned her Master of Arts degree from Ohio University in International Affairs/Southeast Asian Studies. She began her Ph.D. studies in the Department of Development Sociology at Cornell University in the fall of 2010 in order to pursue her interest in the sociology of agricultural production in Southeast Asia.

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Introduction

In post-Green Revolution Indonesia the production of rice has become inseparable from the use of agricultural chemicals. Heavily supported and disseminated through the country with government backing, the use of chemicals to stem weed growth and insect infestation is now pervasive in rural areas. The government subsidizes fertilizer and the names of herbicides and pesticides are plastered across the bodies of rural farmers as companies give away free t-shirts and hats. Yet, a small network of organic farmers has been developing in the country since the mid-1980s. With rising returns on the domestic and international market for organic rice and the high cost of chemical inputs, both in terms of finance and the health of farmers and their land, it is little wonder that organic methods look promising to farmers. However, the world of organics and the 'green' market is complicated due to high profit margins coupled with labeling, marketing, and certification processes that are difficult to navigate. This article uses a case study of a village grappling with the changes that a switch to organic entails in order to untangle the commodity web of organic rice from and in Indonesia.

Rice, in general, is a contentious issue in Southeast Asia, whether eaten at home or bound for the domestic or international market. Rice and rice production have played important roles in Southeast Asian politics, trade, and society since rice was first domesticated from a wild, water-loving grass, but the last decade has proven particularly tumultuous with food crises occurring in 2008 and 2011. When domestic prices began to spike to unprecedented levels in the early 21st century, many Southeast Asian countries took protective measures and instituted export bans to keep prices from rising even higher. These protective measures had a severe impact not only on the economies of those countries that banned the export of rice due to loss of export incomes, but

also on other Southeast Asian countries that depend on rice imports.

Although Indonesia appeared consistently among the top five world rice producers in the 1970s and then again since 1994, it has also been a significant rice importer. This is because of its high consumption rates, loss of rice farmland due to a housing boom, and attempts by the government to stockpile rice. However, a ban on private imports of rice has been in effect since early 2004 in order to stem inflation, so more recent imports are primarily attributed to government-to-government deals. In connection with constant stockpiling and importing, the Indonesian government continues to appeal to the populace to consume less rice so that the government's goal of self-sufficiency in rice by 2014 can be met (FAO 2011). The government introduced its National Programme to Increase Rice Production (P2BN) in 2011, with the goal of achieving a 10-million ton surplus of rice by 2015. Under the program it has opened up 'government-owned' lands¹ in Kalimantan for rice production and has attempted to increase average wet-rice yields from 2.7 tons per hectare to 6 tons per hectare in order to achieve self-sufficiency – a controversial move since it is always dangerous to think of any land as 'unproductive' or 'uninhabited.'

This information on the state of global and Southeast Asian rice production is key contextual information in understanding the current situation of Indonesian organic rice production. This international market for Indonesian rice is inextricably tied to the domestic market, and in this paper I will focus on the latter and on the process of the commoditization of organically grown rice therein. In order to understand this social process, I specifically explore

¹ The idea of 'government-owned' lands in Indonesia is contested as much of the land claimed by the government has long been claimed and worked by local community members in traditional land tenure systems. This is yet another reason why this program is contentious in Indonesia.

the importance of naming commodities and the associations that we place on certain words.

I analyze the difference between *organik* rice being sold in Indonesian metropolitan shopping centers and the *beras 'tanpa kimia'* ('organic rice' in Indonesian or more literally 'husked, uncooked rice without chemicals') being eaten in rural villages. I will also explore the process of the commoditization of language, such as using words like *organik* to describe this organic rice grown in Indonesia and the proliferation and impact of the green capitalism. As Friedmann (2005) explains how the changes in capitalist economic motive, "changes in environmental consciousness and related changes in health, animal welfare, and trade concerns, lead to consumer demand for new kinds of commodities" (232). The products that have emerged as the new commodities that Friedmann refers to within green capitalism are the central concern of this article. More specifically, I explore the mobility that is granted to these new commodities through their connection to green capitalism. While global trade is not a new phenomenon, the unprecedented mobility granted to certain products (especially agricultural products) through green capitalism is a new process that often moves all, rather than the excess, to predestined markets in the Global North from producers in the Global South. This movement means that we need to critically explore the actual commodity being exchanged. I contend that there is a new commodity being exchanged through this mobility: the word 'organic' in 'organic rice' production, in addition to the actual rice. How does 'organic rice' in green capitalism gain mobility? How is the mobility of organic rice important to its diffusion? And is the concept of its mobility tied to the actual product held in the consumers' hands, or to another more intangible commodity held in their imaginations - an imagined commodity? Furthermore, what is the role of producers, consumers, development organizations, the state, and other actors in the

commodity chain, or web, for the organic rice coming from the field site in this study?

In the following pages, I first set up the theoretical and then methodological approaches that frame the analysis. The paper is then divided into four sections that highlight the role of the different components of the commodity web within green capitalism for organic rice. I explore the process of creating a ‘commodity,’ the impact of the development organization, the producers, and the consumers of this ‘product.’ Throughout the analysis, I use the specific case of the organization Dewi SRI and this NGO’s attempts to connect with rural rice farmers in a village in West Java. While specific to this local community, the experiences of this group of farmers are intimately linked to and have implications for global green capitalism of organic production and distribution. My final section draws from this example in order to explore these broader connections and understand the implications of the process of the commoditization of “organic rice” in world markets. This section also attempts to draw some conclusions based on agricultural development’s role in the process of fetishism and commodification of agricultural products, especially those being routed through the ‘green’ market. Through a mix of ethnographic evidence and theoretical considerations, I present the reader with a case of the creation of an ‘imagined commodity’ – commodification of a social construct that is made possible through the spread of green capitalism.

Language as a Commodity

Commodities exist within the imagination as objects. Commodification is a unique social process that links the social world of labor with the economic world of money. However, the existence of commodities is inextricably tied to tangible objects that can be seen, felt, and held.

For example, a coat is an expression of a worker's labor that can be exchanged for currency depending on the current exchange value of coats (Marx 1887/1990). Yet, how do we explain intangibles that have become valuable and can also be traded for currency? How do particular smells, tastes, object names, and sounds become valued just as their tangible counterparts do? In light of these questions, this paper seeks to delink the tangible from the social and therefore, explore the ways that the social and the economic worlds are linked without a visible commodity object. This process has already been followed to some extent with ethnicity (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009), smells (Classen et al 1994), and taste (Lotti 2010), but while the commoditization of language as a whole has been explored the case of particular words has not. For example, the possibility of language being viewed as a commodity emerged in the past decade as a way to challenge traditional thinking about tangible commodities. An edited volume, *Language As Commodity: Global Structures, Local Marketplaces* (Tan and Rubdy 2008) explores language as a commodity, but only in relation to choosing one language over another, rather than using certain words of a particular language in order to benefit from their social collateral. Indeed, the first three vignettes presented in the editors' *Introduction* all present formal language learning settings – a college, a middle school, and the Japanese school system. Yet, these formalized settings imply that the students will be learning a language in some fashion. Their situation tells us little about the impact of language as a commodity on informal language use or on those who are not learning a language, but rather choosing certain words and scattering them throughout their own speech for some purpose.

I also explore the ways in which language and word choice within agricultural programs reflect value and negotiation within power regimes. Y. Winarto in her book *Seeds of Knowledge*

focuses on the way that particular words are used and given value within agricultural development programs, but she does not make the connection between words and commodification. Instead, she discusses the phenomenon of word choice in her study on Integrated Pest Management (IPM) programs in Indonesia. Winarto argues that, “even though the national IPM experts had stipulated that the IPM trainers avoid the use of foreign terms, the trainers used many new words in the communication with farmers” (Winarto 2004: 114). Many of the terms highlighted by Winarto are still impacting NGO and System of Rice Intensification (SRI) communication with farmers in Indonesia. These terms are *ekosistem* for ecosystem, *predator* for predator, *jaring makanan* for food web (direct English translation), *siklus hidup* for life cycle (direct English translation), and *diskusi* for discussion (Winarto 2004: 114). Agricultural development workers in Indonesia create a specific rhetoric surrounding the products and the production systems they are promoting based on English terms and concepts. The farmers who participate in these programs then associate the programmatic agricultural methods with foreign processes. This inherently associates a certain value with the words used, but her analysis does not expand the idea to the economic realm with any explicit connection to commodification.

One of the earliest books specifically focused on Indonesia and language, but outside the linguistics discipline, is Benedict Anderson’s *Language and Power: Exploring Political Cultures in Indonesia* (1990). The essays in the book were written over the course of Anderson’s career, some dating back to 1966. Anderson primarily links language to politics and issues of power. The essays are both historical and contemporary in nature; obviously important for his analysis is the idea of national revolution. However, if we expand his concept of revolution to social

movements and development and/or at least delink it from politics and start to think about the ways that revolution and social movements are connected to the language used to describe them, then his analysis can easily be applied to the West Java case discussed here. For just as Anderson found that the ‘Javanese tradition’ that fueled political revolution in the early to mid-20th century was a modern construct created through intentional language use, we can start to see how the ‘agrarian tradition’ idealized in modern agricultural development programs is also a modern construct (1990: 12). This construct is intended to further the aims of a new green revolution and the production and sale of ‘organic’ agricultural commodities.

Imagined Commodities and Commodity Communities

Anderson’s works are an important starting point for this research in another way. His work *Imagined Communities* (1983) is a fundamental text in politics, but again if we attempt to expand his thinking beyond disciplinary boundaries, we can start to apply his thoughts on the origins of “communities” to the world of commodities. He argues that the strongest element that binds a community together is the *idea* of the community that is shared by all those in it (1983:15). Anderson’s focus is the role of community in making the modern nation state possible, but I expand this idea to the market and the conception of the commodity web as a community, where consumers, producers, and NGOs are brought together. It is a small leap to think about other forms of imagined communities – a leap that others have made in reference to sexual communities, ethnic communities, and other communities of practice.

Michael Warner in *Public and Counterpublics* (2005) has described the public as “a space of discourse organized by nothing other than discourse itself” (67). Perhaps most

significantly, he points out that these communities, created around discourse are, “capable of being addressed, and capable of action” (69). While Warner’s conception of the public is based on the hetero- and homosexual communities, his connection to discourse and rhetoric is similar both to Anderson’s emphasis on the importance of media in national communities and to this paper’s use of marketing as a means for understanding commodity communities. In fact, Anderson’s emphasis on the importance of language and print media in the process of creating communities makes his work a natural starting point for this paper. Just as Anderson claims that in creating nationalism “speakers of the huge variety of Frenches, Englishes, or Spanishes, who might find it difficult or even impossible to understand one another in conversation, became capable of comprehending one another via print and paper”; marketing and print advertising thus assisted in creating a community where imagined communities can exist (Anderson 1983: 44). Furthermore, I argue that in addition to the “print capitalism” which Anderson credits, there is also an element of idealization of the other within this web of commodities that contributes to the creation of a community.

In their book *Ethnicity, Inc.*, John and Jean Comaroff also force the reader to think about the alternative conceptions of ‘community’ outside of politics and the nation. Ethnicity, while at times intricately entangled with politics, transcends national boundaries. One only need think about the many refugee groups that are dispersed throughout the world by conflict, but manage to maintain connections with other group members to understand this idea of an ethnic community. *Ethnicity, Inc.* is also important in another way for this analysis. The Comaroffs explain how idealization is a key point in the commoditization of ethnicity. Ethnic tourism relies heavily on an “identity economy” which is defined as a “corporate identity” and “identity as

value-added” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009: 5). The idealization process is a key component of the commoditization process. If there was not some form of idealization occurring, then ethnic groups might still coalesce as a community, but when it does occur then the ability to capitalize on the perceptions of a certain ethnicity becomes possible.

The combined ideas of breaking down physical boundaries for “communities” and the simultaneous idealization of their nature is key for the idea of the imagined community, and therefore the imagined commodity. The basis of the imagined community (whether political, ethnic, or sexual) for Anderson, is that it does not require face-to-face interaction as was previously thought to be necessary for a ‘community.’ My argument is that a commodity, much like a community, is imagined, and created, less through the interactions of producers, consumers, and distributors, than through their perceptions of each other. The imagined commodity does not require face-to-face interaction and in fact relies on producers, consumers, and distributors not interacting. Their perceptions of each other, rather than reality, create the imagined commodity. An important part of the creation of imagined communities, as well as imagined commodities, is the aspect of idealization. Through the imagination, the commodity becomes whatever people need it to be. The flexibility and the changing nature of the imagined commodity is exactly how it survives and thrives.

Methods and Case Details

The case study for this paper is a System of Rice Intensification (SRI) project just north of Bandung, Indonesia. SRI is a production method that is gaining momentum in the Global

South as it promises higher yields using fewer inputs than normal rice production. The SRI agricultural movement encourages production through practices that do not rely on sophisticated technology and require fewer external inputs, such as chemical fertilizers, herbicides, pesticides, irrigation, or special seeds (Uphoff et al 2002). For example, farmers are encouraged to plant seedlings one by one and not to flood the fields, thus saving seeds and water. Seedlings are planted further apart in a grid pattern that further reduces the quantity needed. SRI was introduced to Indonesia in 1999/2000 as one of the first countries where the methods were implemented outside of Madagascar, where it originated. There were 100,000 hectares under SRI production in 2011 with a goal of 1.5 million hectares in 2015 by the Indonesian government and the Ministry of Agriculture (Uphoff 2011). With such slow growth within the first 10 years after introduction, it seems highly unlikely that these goals will be met by 2015. However, SRI rice production in Indonesia averaged 11.86 ton/hectare in 2010-2011 while conventional rice production averaged 6.69 ton/hectare in the same time period (Uphoff 2011). These numbers show that SRI production in Indonesia is indeed a unique case and warrants further investigation into the possible reasons for such slow growth despite such promising returns.

Although SRI production does not require the use of organic methods, in the Dewi SRI case, SRI production is closely linked with organic production. For example, a farmer can use SRI production methods and not produce rice organically, but most farmers involved in this case study's agricultural development program are encouraged by the NGO to use organic methods, including organic fertilizer produced from manure and hand weeding of the rice paddy, rather than pesticides. The NGO simultaneously encourages SRI production and pushes the community

to produce ‘organically-grown’ rice.

The site of the particular SRI project in this paper, located in a small agricultural community north of Bandung, lies on the side of Tangkuban Perahu volcano, which last erupted in 1983, leaving behind a rich accumulation of volcanic ash. These volcanic soils produce solid rice harvests year after year, averaging around six to eight tons per hectare, which already meet or exceed the government’s self-sufficiency goals for rice yields. In 2008, these rich volcanic soils became the target of an NGO out of Bandung, which I shall call Dewi SRI. Dewi SRI had already been working on test plots for a year in Bandung before moving to the site near Tangkuban Perahu volcano in 2008. It chose the village for SRI development for two primary reasons: the volcanic soils would make it easier to implement organic methods, and the village headman was a close friend of one of the founders of the NGO, and had promised to help promote the movement in his village. I visited the village several times a week during the period of November 2009 to June 2010. I returned to the village during June 2013 to interview farmers and NGO workers who were still involved in the project.

Another SRI and organic-rice-growing group in Tasikmalaya, Indonesia is important for the present analysis. The two projects are not related and their leaders do not work together, but their one main connection is that both are SRI projects, which is still rare in Indonesia. As Dewi SRI was only getting its feet on the ground, it based many of its methods on the more established program in Tasikmalaya. The most important distinction between the two programs is that the program in Tasikmalaya is an exporter of organic rice, which is available even at my own local co-op in Ithaca, New York. The community markets its rice to consumers in the Global North

through a “Fair Trade” supply chain, but does not sell any of its rice domestically. However, Dewi SRI is currently only selling its organic rice within Indonesia and is still exploring options for export.²

Within the contentious world of rice in Southeast Asia, one might wonder how, and why, Indonesia would continue to export rice at all under these conditions. The focus of such exports has been the niche market of organic and Fair Trade rice grown in agricultural development programs. The Tasikmalaya rice is marketed as ‘organic volcano rice’ in the United States, and because it is high value specialty rice, it is exempt from export bans. Such specialty rice varieties petitioned for exemption from export bans just within the last decade and found their way into the Global North.

Dewi SRI based much of its project structure on the Tasikmalaya project as well as other SRI projects around the world. Their interactions with participants function as many other SRI projects (Uphoff 2011) – using land that is donated or buying it from willing sellers and then having it farmed by paddy farmers trained by the NGO. The farmers receive a basic wage and then as a bonus 1/3 of the value of production over seven tons per hectare. Another 1/3 goes to the NGO and the final 1/3 goes toward production costs. Dewi SRI claimed that farmers in the area were achieving an average of 8-12 tons/hectare; but some farmers make less than seven tons/hectare, especially over the first couple of years. As of 2011, Dewi SRI had 1.5 hectares in production in the village and a total of ten farmers who had switched or semi-switched when I

² I do not specifically concentrate on the Fair Trade certification process in this paper for a variety of reasons: While an interesting element in the commoditization process, much has already been written on the movement (*see* Jaffee 2007; Jaffee 2008; and Guthman 2004; as well as a comprehensive literature review on Fair Trade by Terstappen et al 2012). While certainly a part of this commoditization process, Fair Trade is perhaps more important to the international commodity web, which is not the focus of this paper.

visited in 2009-10. The project had lost momentum by the time I visited in June of 2013 and the total number of participants actively involved had fallen to eight.

In my research, I used ethnographic methods, including structured and semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and some surveys with open-ended qualitative questions in order to discuss the SRI program with villagers, NGO workers, and consumers. Within the village, I worked with the village headman, farmers who had already switched to SRI methods, farmers who were farming using SRI methods on the NGO's land but conventional methods on their own, as well as farmers who were aware of the SRI methods but were unwilling to switch. Within the NGO, I communicated with two of the general group leaders (Dewi SRI is part of a larger organization) through email. I also worked extensively with the main project leader in person when he was in the village and through email communication when he was not. I also interviewed other project workers who visited and worked in the village. The consumer section of this research was more difficult to complete. The research involved communicating with and interviewing consumers who had purchased SRI rice (both within Indonesia and in the United States), consumers who had purchased organic rice but not necessarily SRI rice, and Indonesian domestic elites who shopped at the upscale shopping centers where organic rice is available. Dewi SRI sells their rice through a website operating in Indonesia, in several upscale shopping centers in Bandung, through direct orders to hospitals, and through their own kiosk located in Bandung.

Through qualitative methods, I critically investigated the many nodes of the commodity chain for organic rice in Indonesia. I discovered that a conception of a commodity "web" seemed to be more accurate than a chain, as these nodes were continually interacting, and often not in a

direct way. In interviews, farmers referenced their perceptions of consumer desires and consumers discussed their desires for rural producers. This web revealed itself through in-depth interviews, focus groups, and the NGO's training sessions. This case study yielded important lessons for those involved in green capitalism and especially the organic rice market.

I also examined a variety of training manuals and documents from NGO and governmental agricultural programs working within Indonesia with rural rice farmers in order to better understand the discourse that these groups were using with their participants. In addition I analyzed the marketing process for organic rice grown and/or sold in Indonesia. This included the marketing for *organik* rice in supermarkets as well as on websites. There was no marketing that I could find for *beras 'tanpa kimia'* outside of local market settings and village level trade networks.

The Commodity

The path that leads rice from one region to another is full of frictions and contradictions, links and connections, and while the product may look the same from one end to the other, the meanings and values attributed to it change and shift along the way. In order to understand the process of commoditization, it is important to understand the theoretical underpinnings of the commodity. Although earlier works also contributed immensely to the discussion of commodities, a useful place to start for this case is Karl Marx's concept of the difference between use and exchange value, and the subsequent fetishism of the commodity (Marx 1887/1990). Marx explains that, "when commodities are exchanged, their exchange value manifests itself as something totally independent of their use value" (Marx 1887/1990: 128). It is

obvious then that the use-value and the exchange-value for a commodity are unlikely to be the same when being bought and sold. I will therefore focus only on the exchange-values as I assume that the use-values (or total labor embodied in the commodity production) are the same for *beras 'tanpa kimia'* and *organik* rice, regardless of the name. If one has the exact same commodity, with the only difference being the name for two products, then the exchange values between the two products should therefore, theoretically, be the same. For example, when translated from Indonesian to English, *beras 'tanpa kimia'* and *beras organik* mean the same thing. However, this equality quickly disappears when you look at these words as representing two separate commodities rather than as the same commodity.

Here I am not comparing the exchange-values between the *organik* or organic rice being sold within the country and outside of it. Those exchange-value disparities are obviously based on consumer markets, such as Fair Trade, which is why I have chosen not to focus on the international market. The differences in exchange-values that I am focusing on here are those between the *beras 'tanpa kimia'* and the *beras organik* being sold in Indonesia.

Beras 'tanpa kimia'

The first value to explore is the commercial value of what I have termed *beras 'tanpa kimia'*. This is a somewhat strange term in the Indonesian language; rice that is not grown in a specifically organic manner is usually just referred to as *beras*. I call it here *beras 'tanpa kimia'* to draw attention to the fact that the rice is grown without chemicals in an organic manner, but is not backed by an NGO or other outside development agency. However, most Indonesians would simply call it, chemicals or not, *beras*. Within Indonesia, *beras 'tanpa kimia'* is sparse as a commodity and the terminology is rarely used when marketing rice for consumption. An

Indonesian farmer producing *beras 'tanpa kimia'* in Indonesia and attempting to sell it in a traditional market could expect to get around the going rate for conventional rice. There is very little differentiation at the local level in prices for these two commodities outside of NGO intervention. The main reason for this is that *beras 'tanpa kimia'* rarely reaches a market, as most farmers who grow rice in this traditional manner do so mostly for home consumption.

During my twelve months conducting research for this study in Indonesia, I never once found “organic rice” being sold in a local market unless it was being backed and marketed by an NGO. This is not to say, however that I did not find rice grown without chemical inputs (*beras 'tanpa kimia'*), but when I did it was always given to me rather than being for sale. For example, one local village was divided into four small subvillages. The farmers in the first three subvillages I visited insisted in multiple focus groups that rice could not and was not being grown in the area without chemical inputs. They insisted this was no longer possible. Yet, when I visited the farmers in the fourth subvillage, they invited me to their fields to see that they were indeed growing rice organically. After following the progression and growth of their crop, I was given a bag full of milled dark red rice grains that were much nuttier and chewier than any rice I had ever eaten. The farmer concluded that the rice was special for many reasons, including the absence of chemicals, the rare variety, and its location in a semi-swidden field rather than in a wet-rice field. He was willing to share information on his methods and how the rice was consumed. All of it was consumed at home, being split between five related families whose members all assisted with the planting, tending, and harvesting of the rice.

Beras organik

The second value to explore is the commercial value of *beras organik*. This value is

much easier to understand and emerges from the organic economy and green capitalism that has developed in Indonesia over the past three decades. The 1980s were a time of change and development for agriculture in Indonesia. Still immersed in the effects of Green Revolution technologies that were introduced in the 1960s and 70s, the first organization to counteract these technologies was founded in 1984 as Bina Sarana Bakti. This idea of the “start” of organic production in Indonesia is obviously only in the sense of diffusing a package of agricultural production practices throughout the farming population in a top-down manner rather than the practice of chemical-free farming. Chemical-free farming, in the traditional sense, only subsided on Java in the mid-1900s when Green Revolution methodologies were introduced.

Throughout the 1990s and 2000s a few more organizations for organics in Indonesia were established. The Indonesia Network of Organic Agriculture (Jaker-PO) was established in 1998 as the first national networking organization for organics in Indonesia. Masyarakat Pertanian Organik Indonesia/Organic Farming Society of Indonesia (MAPORINA) was established in 2000 as a venture between the Department of Agriculture and academics. The following year the Department of Agriculture launched the “Go Organic 2010” program. The Indonesia Organic Alliance (IOA) and the Indonesian Organic Producer Association (APOI) were both founded in the mid-2000s and organic certification standards have started to take on a more organized and formalized form since then (Willer and Kilcher 2011).

The process of organic certification in Indonesia is still rife with standardization problems. With only 0.2% of the agricultural land being managed organically (certified), it is unlikely to become easier anytime soon, especially since it involves a small percentage of

farmland, with a high profit return. For example, one organic production promoter claims that *beras organik* in Indonesia can achieve a premium price of 60% more in the Indonesian market than conventional rice (Uphoff 2011).

Table 1 – Characteristics of organically grown rice in Indonesia

	Beras ‘tanpa kimia’	Organik rice
Production	-Usually produced for home consumption	-Often produced through government or NGO backed projects
Market	-Difficult to locate in local markets if not being backed and marketed by NGOs	-Sold in urban supermarkets rather than traditional open-air markets -Marketed to domestic elites who speak some English
Cost	-Commands the same price as conventionally-grown rice	-50-60% increase in price over conventionally-grown rice sold in traditional markets

Fetishism of beras organik and beras ‘tanpa kimia’

Although exactly the same amount of labor is needed to produce these two products (use-value), the exchange-value between them varies considerably. As this paper will show, the exchange-values between *organik* and *beras ‘tanpa kimia’* have become quite “fetishized”. Nevins and Peluso explain this process, especially with regard to the labor embodied in the product,

“As Marx pointed out long ago, however, the social relationships and therefore the politics of production processes are often obscured by a focus on, or fetishization of, the end product - the commodity as a thing - and its profit-making capacities and exchange value. The work of those who produced the commodities, the social relationships that

shaped and were shaped by their lives and the production processes, are typically hidden by the glorification of these inventions and their sale as commodities" (Nevins and Peluso 2008: 2).

The idea of organic rice has come to embody a value of social relations outside of the total labor of the producer/farmer. Therefore, I would argue that there is a new commodity being valued and exchanged: the word 'organic' in 'organic rice' production, in addition to the actual rice. While Marx initially explains that labor and productivity should directly correlate to the output of that labor (the commodity), he goes on to show that in reality there exists a fetishism of that commodity whereby,

"The commodity reflects the social characteristics of men's [sic] own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things. Hence it also reflects the social relation of the producers to the sum total of labour as a social relation between objects, a relation which exists apart from and outside the producers" (Marx 1867/1992: 164).

In this case, the total labor in the two production methods would be the same with the subsequent production of the same commodity, but with a difference of exchange-values based on the fetishism of the word "organic" that is placed on one – a fetishism of the socio-natural properties embodied within the rice. Therefore, the ideas of use-value, exchange-value and the fetishization of the commodity are useful analytical tools for exploring the strange relationship between organic/*organik* rice and *beras 'tanpa kimia'* and the different use and exchange values that they have come to possess.

The NGO

It is this complex world of organic standardization and production in Indonesia that the

organization Dewi SRI was born into. While working for organic certification, the NGO is also influenced by the globalized world that is an inherent part of organic production and the “green” market in Indonesia. The NGO Dewi SRI is based in Indonesia, and is managed by Indonesians who have chosen to use rice production methods developed by a French priest in Madagascar, and promoted by an American academic³. This example of globalized green capitalism shows how Dewi SRI, and other organizations like it that engage in the “green” market, simultaneously create and embrace rising moral and ethical demands from consumers (Campbell and Coombes 1999; Friedmann 2005). They stand as intermediaries between consumers who desire green products and producers poised to benefit socially and financially from rising demand for products like organic rice. Without the organization this particular commodity (in its imagined form) would not exist and therefore an analysis of organic rice as a commodity truly begins with the NGO. In this section, I focus on the role that Dewi SRI has played in the creation of higher exchange-values for their *beras organik* within Indonesia. Such an increase has become possible because of cross-culturally informed values and the ease of mobility for products recognized to have some sort of cultural cache based on a certain word, taste, origin, etc.

In her article on commoditization of taste in Slow Food programs, A. Lotti (2010) explains how the incorporation of many products into the Slow Food and Presidia program has started a gradual process of commoditizing the way a particular product tastes through standardizing what should taste "good" according to the organizers of the programs. There is the *creation of value* for certain products, whether it is in taste or language, through agricultural programs that places a certain value on products or ideas that would not have been possible

³ Developed by Fr. Henri di Laulanie and promoted heavily by Dr. Norman Uphoff of Cornell University.

without an affiliation with the program. Lotti calls this a culturally informed value, and while for her the value is being placed on a certain taste for a product (Lotti 2010), in the case at hand, the value is being placed on the word associated with the assumed production method.

In our case, the culturally informed value is important because it provides mobility for the rice being produced from the project. By focusing on this mobility, we gain an understanding of how commoditized products such as organic rice generally travel away from the rural communities where they are produced. On one hand this seems like the intention and best-case scenario for an organic agricultural program. We can see the benefit of attaching a certain value to these products and the higher market value producers receive upon the sale of their products outside of the community. The NGO promotes this process as it provides both income for the advancement of its programs and also higher income for the farmers, which is enticing for current and possible future participants.

The use of the word *organik* in the NGO's programming to describe the rice and the production method also sets up a situation where not only is the commodity granted mobility, but so is the knowledge system for producing it. Organic methods have come to be seen as "western" rather than as a return to non-chemical farming practices that were common before the previous development intervention – The Green Revolution. This example of development terminology used in agricultural projects highlights a common phenomenon in development practice where local knowledge is ignored or marginalized, despite its adaptation to local conditions or even its similarity to the "modern" technologies being pushed on the community (Esman and Uphoff, 1988).

Within the Dewi SRI project farmer participants repeatedly explained to me that organic

and traditional farming were different because organic is a western method. The basis for their differentiation between the two methods was the origin of the knowledge, not actual practices. One respondent, when asked if there had previously been *organik* methods practiced in the area, said, “The village officials brought in people before to try it, but they haven’t returned”.⁴ Another respondent said there had previously been students in the area trying to teach organic, but that they were now gone and if farmers wanted information on *organik*, they had to go to an agricultural research station in the nearby town of Lembang for instructions.⁵ In fact, in many of the interviews I conducted, farmers had a hard time connecting the idea of “organic” to the type of farming that their grandparents practiced prior to the introduction of Green Revolution technologies and the reliance on chemical inputs. For example, one survey in this study had a question concerning the type of farming that was practiced in the area before the Green Revolution. Participants in the Dewi SRI project as well as community farmers who had chosen not to participate in the SRI project were asked to complete the survey (n=15) and none of the respondents associated the methods of their forbearers with the term organic. Granted, respondents could have confused the methods of SRI with organic rather than thinking of organic itself. Yet, the important fact here is that in their explanations they maintained that the methods of the past were not organic because organic is a *new* process that has come to Indonesia. However, in an interesting change in perception, one farmer who had insisted that the methods were different in 2010, insisted that traditional farming and organic farming were the *same* in 2013. Whether this was a change in opinion or a change in rhetoric from the project is unclear, but the change in this particular farmer’s answer was striking.

⁴ M007 interview 2010

⁵ M006 interview 2010

The choice of language, discourse, and rhetoric in agricultural development programs is a conscious and powerful decision, linked to a much larger idea of semantics. As N. Thiong’O noted in his landmark study on language, “The choice of language and the use to which language is put is central to a people’s definition of themselves in relation to their natural and social environment, indeed in relation to the entire universe” (1986: 4). In Dewi SRI’s case, the choice to use the term *organik* rather than *tanpa kimia* allows the NGO to become powerful knowledge brokers with hegemony over the methods of SRI and organics. It also grants their products prestige and a higher commercial value domestically, based on their association with Western products.

Dewi SRI is not alone. Companies are now selling organic rice across Indonesia, primarily in urban centers. NGOs, with names such as *Sari Organik*, *Bali Organik*, and *Beras Organik*, are spreading across the archipelago. With much of the focus on profit margins for both companies and NGOs promoting organic rice, it is difficult to determine the difference between these two groups. One touts a product called “Pop Rice *Organik*,” which is marketed on their website as a “unique food prepared from organic rice with the addition of organic coconut sugar ants. Pop rice hygienically processed without chemicals, preservatives, coloring, flavoring. Pop Rice can be eaten with milk as cereal” (Anak Lima 2011). With a price tag of Rp. 16,000-24,000 (\$1.65 - \$2.48), the snack is certainly being marketed to children of domestic elites rather than the children of farmers. This price is roughly equivalent to two to four days of hired farm labor in the fields, as a typical farm laborer will earn Rp. 5,000 to Rp. 10,000 (\$0.52 - \$1.03) a day depending on the work performed and gender. Another group sells 5 kg. of organic rice for Rp.

75,000 (\$7.74)⁶. As one representative for a company claimed “The exact price is not an issue when compared to the benefits for your health”.⁷ Products and marketing campaigns like these have given NGOs control over the idea of organic production methods within Indonesia and the commodities being produced using them.

The Producer

In emphasizing the social factors influencing organic rice production, we must be constantly aware of the power struggles that are continually defining the needs and desires of both consumers and producers. With this in mind, I would like to draw attention to the complex web-like networks that compose commodity markets. The producers’ place in this web is marked by a double consciousness (Du Bois 1994). On one hand, the producers culturally value the rice they produce in a certain way, shaped by their upbringing and their lifetime of farming. On the other hand, they economically value rice in another way, shaped by their interaction with the NGO and their experiences with the profits from selling organic rice. With a motto of “health ‘n wealth”, Dewi SRI obviously not only recognizes the double consciousness of their producers, but more importantly they depend upon it.

In the first instance (culturally), the view of rice in Southeast Asia is strikingly similar to J. Davidson’s discussion of rice in Africa. She claims that rice “mediates all social spheres and holds together the contradictions across them. It is the means through which people present themselves to themselves and others” (Davidson 2012: 18). This all-consuming view of rice as

⁶ <http://www.beras-organik.biz/Beras-Organik.html>

⁷ <http://ptbrilianjaya.itrademarket.com/2727186/beras-organik-murah.htm>

life is common amongst farmers in the project. It must be difficult for them to negotiate within their minds the idea of the pricelessness of rice with the high profits earned by selling it through the NGO. To illustrate this struggle, I recount here the conversation from one focus group meeting. The participants included the head of the Dewi SRI, the head of the village where the program was taking place, and four of the farmers making the switch to organic methods of production through Dewi SRI's agricultural program. The head of the village, who was also a farmer, kept claiming the health benefits of growing organically for the farmer, the environment, and the consumer, but the other four farmers kept discussing the price they received for their organic rice. Of the five farmers sitting at the meeting, only one of them was eating at home the organic rice he grew (the head of the village and the person responsible for the NGO's presence in the village). The rest of the farmers viewed the organic rice as too precious a commodity and chose to sell it all and then buy local (non-organic) rice in the local market. Upon returning to the project site during follow-up research, still none of the participants involved were eating the rice they grew at home. The only participant who did so during initial research was no longer actively involved in the project. His interest and involvement in the project had waned after he had failed to win re-election as village head.

Obviously, the farmers in this study understand the value that is attached to the rice they are producing. If they are getting a higher price by selling it to foreign markets and domestic elites, should Dewi SRI's program be seen as a failure because the farmers are not actually eating the rice they produce? The answer to this question depends on the goals of Dewi SRI - are they promoting the organic methods or are they promoting the organic product? It also depends

on the goals of the farmer participants – did they join to improve their health or to improve their material living conditions?

When discussing the role of the producers and their double consciousness, the impact of development in the Global South cannot be overlooked. While there are certainly NGOs now operating in Indonesia that are run by Indonesians (including Dewi SRI), the history of development programs in the country is thick with Western influence. Participants constantly view Dewi SRI's production methods as inherently correct simply because they are “new” or “Western.” The village leader, in one interview, stated that it was important for the village to become an *organik desa*, or “organic village.” Why did he choose to use this wording rather than *desa tanpa kimia* (non-chemical village) or another such Indonesian phrase? While not discounting the possible extent of his intrinsic commitment to the ideals of organic food production, his use of the phrase suggests less about his commitment to a healthy, chemical-free lifestyle for his constituents and more about his desire to be recognized and well-regarded in a global economy dominated by Western ideals.

Yet, Indonesia's rice farmers are not powerless in the process of development. They are constantly negotiating the spaces of development and knowledge in order to make it work best to their advantage (Esmann and Uphoff, 1998). The agency of the farmer/producer in the production of “organic rice” is an important aspect of this analysis. Presenting the producer/farmer as a mere object of the agricultural development programs that target him/her diminishes his/her role as an active participant in the development process (Cooper and Packard 1997). Within commodity chain analysis in particular, recent research has called attention to this issue, claiming that commodity chain analysis has failed to present workers as more than passive

victims (Smith et al. 2002). However, it is equally important to understand the role of development histories in creating a space for such a market for “organic rice” to develop. The farmers working with Dewi SRI have agency in the process of the commoditization of their rice as “organic” - they choose to participate. Yet, this participation must be understood within the context of the underlying structure of the alternatives they have to alternative development.

The Consumer

This section traces the commodity web to the consumers and focuses on their role in the commodification of language in agricultural programs. Consumers of niche agricultural products can be viewed in two ways that are important for this analysis. The first, most obvious, way is that consumers of these products are hoping to use their buying power to support programs that promote certain methods and social justice goals (like the health of farmers and the environment), which are promoted through programs like Fair Trade (Raynolds and Ngcwangu 2010). However, other consumers are interested in the social cache that is associated with ‘green’ products, such as organic/*organik* rice or even designer salts (Singer 2012). Either way, the consumer of ‘organic’ products is very much a producer in this case. Consumers produce and control markets with their moral and ethical desires for products. They create a space for social commodities such as ‘organic’ products to emerge. However, here, I am concentrating on ways that cultural cache plays into the organic rice economy. At this point in Indonesia, the creation of a market for products with high social value has become more of an issue than the ways that ethical and moral desires shape markets.

I would argue that this process is the result of an idealization of the producers of agricultural products. Just as many Western and Indonesian domestic elites idealize the situation of the rural rice farmer, the farmer is just as guilty of that same idealization. Oftentimes, to international and domestic consumers, Dewi SRI's participants are the "rural farmers" producing "healthy, organic rice" just as they have been doing for centuries, but consumers rarely question the history of the region or the producers in the process or the effects of former development programs, such as the Green Revolution. Expanding on this idea, we can see how the commodification of language goes much deeper to the commodification of knowledge systems. It is an idealization of "rural" or "traditional" knowledge, even to the extent of making a local crop into something that it is not, but that has added value. Cooper and Packard problematize this idealized vision of the Global South farmer, saying, "The very category [indigenous technical knowledge] suggests that such knowledge can be neatly bounded from knowledge of the more universal sort; Africans or Asians are assumed to know certain things by virtue of their birth and culture" (Cooper and Packard 1997: 28).

This idealization is not just happening in the Northern consumer/Southern producer context – although it is probably more common here. There are many instances of domestic elites idealizing the knowledge of their fellow citizens who are growing rice for their consumption. Many Indonesian domestic elites view various novelty rice varieties as more authentic and connected to the rural producers, whereas many rural producers no longer grow more than a handful of varieties. The Indonesian variety of aromatic rice called "Cianjur Pandanwangi" is a good example of this process. Throughout the course of my fieldwork, I used a seed-banking project to collect and discuss various local varieties with farmers. When I was discussing the

project with some friends visiting from Bandung, I lamented that I was receiving many duplicate samples of rice seed from farmers. Furthermore, those samples were hybrid varieties and not “traditional” varieties. The wife of the family from Bandung assured me that she could get me some traditional varieties in Bandung, and the next time they visited they brought a gracious gift of a 50-kilo bag of Cianjur Pandanwangi. This was the same variety that farmers in my last focus group had praised for its lovely smell. It was also the same variety that they claimed was impossible to find anymore, for either planting or cooking. Upon asking the provider of the gift of its origins, she explained that it was being grown on an experimental farm near Bandung. Domestic elites now often have more access to traditional and endangered varieties of rice than do rural farmers. Furthermore, if the local farmers are growing rare varieties, they are sold for high prices in niche markets in the metropolitan areas rather than being used for local consumption.

These issues illustrate how NGOs like Dewi SRI are uniquely positioned to benefit from the idealization of producers and consumers through the sale of niche products like organic rice. The farmers’ knowledge is being co-opted, repackaged in a new vocabulary and then re-presented to those same farmers as new knowledge, while it is being presented to the consumer as old, traditional knowledge. The farmers see it as a new method, the consumers see it as a traditional method and the NGO sees it as a way to commoditize the value of the product based on an idealized image of the rural producer. Yet again, the importance of mobility is highlighted here. The mobility is important, not only for the product but also for the knowledge system, the domestic consumers’ conception of rural producers, and the rural producers’ conception of the

domestic elite consumers. This mobility helps create an imagined community of commodities, consumers, producers, and organizations within green capitalism and the emergence of imagined commodities that bear little resemblance to the previous generation of commodities.

Implications and Conclusions

With a broader understanding of the web that connects producers, consumers, and NGOs within the organic rice market, I can now return to the question of the difference that a name can make for certain commodities. Are *beras 'tanpa kimia'* and *beras organik* two different products or are they the same? Furthermore, what are the implications of any difference? While a traditional economic analysis of these commodities might conclude that they are the same product, this paper concludes that they are not and that there is a significant price difference (or exchange value) that must be explained. This difference in the name of a product can be crucial in terms of its exchange value; to some degree, the new commodity is no longer *beras* or 'rice,' but rather the word organic that is attached to one product, but not the other.

While specific to a particular organization in agricultural production in Indonesia, the case of Dewi SRI's experience has large-scale implications for the plethora of agricultural NGOs developing in countries across Southeast Asia, South Asia, and Africa. In order to understand these implications of the process of the commoditization of 'organic' rice in domestic (and possibly global) markets, it is critical to bring together these three communities within the imagined community of green capitalism for organic rice – the NGO, the producer, and the consumer. It becomes obvious that agricultural development projects play an important role in the process of fetishism and commodification of agricultural products, especially those being

routed through the ‘green’ market. This paper has also highlighted the importance of mobility in the case of the creation of an ‘imagined commodity’ – commodification of a social construct that is made possible through the green market, especially the idealization of knowledge on the part of producers, NGOs, and consumers.

There are several implications for this commoditization of language and knowledge that is happening in rural agricultural programs in Indonesia. Perhaps the most important might be to rethink ideas of ‘alternative development’ projects such as organic agricultural projects.

‘Alternative’ development produces integration rather than an actual alternative, nor do organic growing methods always provide freedom from the market. These programs often introduce producers into the world market economy just as much as any previous system and they fail to provide any sort of substantial change in participants’ lives. Producers, as well as consumers and development organizations, are often locked into a development system that works primarily through the capitalistic market system, which leads to the commodification of ideas such as taste and smell, and in the case I’ve presented here – language.

Although her study focused on the organic agricultural movement in California, Julie Guthman’s results are very similar to those found in this study. She claims that, “The organic movement has fallen woefully short of addressing the social justice issues that are often assumed to be part and parcel of organic farming” (Guthman 2004: 2). A finding, for both of these studies, points to the fact that consumers must become aware of the all too common inability of alternative development projects to provide meaningful change in social structures present within communities. Future research is needed to better understand both how this change might occur and whose responsibility it is to make those changes.

Also at hand are the myriad of social justice issues brought up in this study, but not thoroughly explored or discussed. First, the issue of the misaligned goals and intentions of participants and development organizations is often at the root of “failure” for projects. Especially important within this study are the monetary goals of the farmers producing organic rice and the unclear goals of Dewi SRI. The development organization’s goals for monetary gain and the spread of environmental and community health often overlap in a confusing manner for researchers, participants, and even the NGO workers. From a social justice standpoint, one must look at how this process might encourage Indonesian rice farmers to accept agricultural movements for the monetary value of the product being produced, rather than for the production methods that improve the health of the farmer and the environment.

Second, there is also the issue of exports and imports of rice in a time of food insecurity for a quickly growing and developing Indonesia. It seems that even within the midst of “green” and “alternative” development programs like SRI, the striking similarity to the traditional development paradigm is hard to miss (Pieterse 1998). There is still an emphasis on economics and market integration for products and producers. The fact that SRI programs in Indonesia have focused on any sort of commodity production at all rather than on encouraging farmers to produce (possibly) healthier rice for themselves and their families underscores the importance of green capitalism in development programs. Encouraging home production and consumption of organically-grown rice within the project essentially cuts out the NGO from potential profits.

Third, the system of SRI agricultural production is, I believe, at a tipping point where their own social justice issues of rhetoric and implementation must also be accounted for. The conclusions within this study are important for SRI and organic rice proponents to take into

consideration, as the unforeseen consequences of these programs often do not manifest themselves until *after* the implementation of a program within a community. While SRI proponents do not specifically call for organic methods of production, the projects are often implemented as such and perhaps the time has come for SRI developers to critically analyze the dissimilarity in their rhetoric and their implementation, especially the specific ways that their projects are implemented in different countries and communities due to cultural expectations.

Finally, issues of land ownership and land access within agricultural development programs, the differential impact of implementing changes in agricultural production on males and females, and the impact on nutrition for a community when the majority of rice grown is exported are all important to consider. Although unresolved within this current study, they are important to underscore because they are some of the social justice issues that will naturally come to mind for readers. I believe that it is important to understand within this study that the black and white categories of success and failure, right and wrong, and helping and hindering do not exist. Readers will hopefully recognize that these issues are much more complicated than these decrepit categories allow.

Finally, there are several areas for continued research that would enhance our understanding of the findings within this study. One area would be the ways in which idealization plays a role in the creation of imagined commodities in a strictly Global North context. For example, how might we understand this process when it is taking place with American farmers and American consumers? Idealization of the other also plays a role, but what is the extent of this factor's impact and what are some of the reasons for its existence? Another

area for further research would be to understand the health motivations for some consumers in buying organic. Obviously, not all consumers buy organics for the same reasons and a fairly easy question here is how to factor in other motivations for consumers.

As a final note, this case might also be considered a policy recommendation. The time has come for many agricultural development projects to examine the possibility for non-commodity production as a solution. Organic agriculture programs all too often pull rural producers into global markets with the promise of higher returns for agricultural products – products that are not nutritionally valuable as they are in their villages of origin. There is a very real need to break the commodity chain of organic rice in order to establish food sovereignty for rural farmers – however much that might disturb the ethical consumer.

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